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ABSTRACT

In the prevailing and traditional definition, literacy is regarded as central to helping people obtain and retain employment, which is the key to moving them from dependency toward greater self-sufficiency. Another, more valid perspective is the view that literacy is not just the acquisition of reading and writing skills but is also a social practice and social currency and, as such, a key to social mobility. The operative force that causes certain groups of people to be marginalized in society, to be regarded as inferior, and to experience unequal and limited access to resources is institutional racism. If a primary purpose of literacy education is to eliminate poverty, then literacy programs and practices must be redesigned to fit various conceptions of poverty and its causes. Some educators and researcher espouse the notion of critical literacy, which is the practice of helping learners make sense of what they are learning by grounding it in the context of their daily lives and reflecting on their individual experiences, with an eye toward social action. Ten practices that literacy providers can use to ensure that their programs are culturally relevant and to encourage learners to move toward critical reflection have been identified. (Contains 29 references.) (MN)

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Poverty, Racism, and Literacy

by Mary Ann Corley

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A significant correlation between race and poverty exists, with Black and Hispanic Americans three times more likely to be impoverished than White Americans (Proctor and Dalaker 2002). The cycle of poverty and low-literacy functioning is well documented, as is the achievement gap between White students and students of color. Race is a persistent factor in employment statistics, educational attainment, and the acquisition of literacy skills, with significantly higher unemployment rates and lower educational attainment rates among Black and Hispanic Americans than among White Americans. The literature on learner attrition and on resistance to participation in adult literacy programs suggests that the current delivery system may not be meeting the needs or expectations of many adults. A small but growing body of literature questions whether cultural dissonance between instructors and learners is a factor in learner attrition, and it advocates increasing cultural relevance in literacy practices. Some of the writings also advocate helping learners move toward critical reflection and social action. This *Digest* explores the poverty-racism-literacy connection, specifically as it relates to adult literacy, the imperative for culturally relevant practices, and the development of critical literacy.

Alternative Definitions of Literacy

In the prevailing and traditional definition, literacy is regarded as central to helping people obtain and retain employment, which is the key to moving them from dependency toward greater self-sufficiency. This functionalist definition, espoused by many policymakers, funders, and employers, is based on the assumption that there are jobs for the poor who are able to improve their literacy skills (Hornbeck and Salamon 1991). However, the U.S. economy currently does not produce enough jobs that pay sufficiently well to create pathways out of poverty (Wilson 1996). Job loss and low wages are unequally distributed across races/ethnicities, with Blacks and Hispanics more likely to lose employment than Whites and more likely to be hired for service work than for better-paying jobs (Bureau of Labor Statistics 2002).

Auerbach (1992) suggests that there exists a "literacy myth" in which economic mobility is touted as the result of literacy acquisition when, in reality, race and gender play a greater role in shaping an individual's economic prospects. Without the availability of jobs that pay a living wage, literacy education loses its value and appeal. Literacy alone cannot overcome the effects of class and race on access to educational and employment opportunities (D'Amico 1999).

Another perspective cited in the literature with increasing frequency suggests that literacy is more than the acquisition of reading and writing skills; it is also a social practice or social currency, and, as such, a key to social mobility (Gee 1991). Learning the hidden rules and cultural codes of the dominant culture, according to this perspective, facilitates upward mobility. To be successful in accessing educational and employment opportunities, members of minority groups must become bicultural, i.e., they must be able to function both in the culture of their identity group and in the dominant culture.

Those outside the dominant culture may find that their "differentness" may result in unequal and limited access to education and other resources that can facilitate social or economic progress. They are marginalized in society, and their cultures, languages, and moral codes frequently dismissed as inferior social practices, even in school settings (Nieto 1992). Individuals who are relegated to marginalized social groups, consistently experiencing lack of privilege and power, often internalize this experience. Internalized oppression, or believing that the self is somehow "less than" and "less worthy," results in lowered expectations for life chances.

Institutional Racism in Education

The operative force that causes certain groups of people to be marginalized in society, to be regarded as inferior, and to experience unequal and limited access to resources is institutional racism. Adult literacy education cannot divorce itself from the defined power relationships that are practiced within social institutions (Quigley 1997). In education, institutional racism can play out in various ways, including standardization, tracking, and "hidden curricula."

Standardization implies that a core curriculum exists and that, to be judged successful, students must demonstrate mastery, at some predefined minimum acceptable level, of the knowledge and skill sets of the core curriculum. Because there is no room within this equation for "otherness," standardization entails injustice and the erasure of difference and diversity (Escobar 1992). In terms of mastery of the skills within a standardized curriculum and performance on standardized achievement tests, children of the affluent outperform children of the poor, and White children generally outperform children of color (Ogbu 1994).

Tracking often sorts students on the basis of race and social class, with the lower tracks predominantly filled by children of color and children from low-income families. U.S. Department of Education data (cited in Losen and Orfield 2002) show clear patterns of overrepresentation of minority children in special education and indicate that African-American students are up to four times as likely as white students to be identified as mentally retarded or emotionally disturbed. Recent efforts at detracking are politically charged, with issues of power and control being played out in struggles over the meaning of intelligence, ability, and merit (Oakes, Wells, and Jones 1997).

Hidden curricula in schooling materials are well documented (Beyer and Apple 1998). The term refers to unstated norms, values, and beliefs that are transmitted to students through underlying rules that structure the routines and social interactions in the educational setting (Giroux 1983). Recent content analyses in adult literacy education by Quigley and Holsinger (1993) and Sandlin (2000) have addressed this concept. In analyzing the content of textbooks commonly used by adult literacy programs, Quigley and Holsinger (1993) found that cultural reproduction of sexism, racism, and socioeconomic stereotypes is an everyday "hidden" presence that abounds in the popular literacy reading materials.

Teaching Critical Literacy

If a primary purpose of literacy education is to eliminate poverty, then literacy programs and practices must be redesigned to fit various conceptions of poverty and its causes (Shannon 1998). Literacy must be viewed as a social issue that is linked to class, gender, and race oppression, and it must be linked to efforts that redress social inequities (Auerbach 1993). Some educators and researchers espouse the notion of *critical literacy*, the practice of helping learners make sense of what they are learning by grounding it in the context of their daily lives and reflecting on their individual experiences, with an eye toward social action. Central to critical literacy is an understanding of how "official knowledge" is constructed. Knowledge construction is the means by which individuals and societies determine what is real and true (Howard 1999). Knowledge is never neutral. It is constructed by those who hold power in social institutions, including education (Apple 1993). As such, dominant groups do not hold "perspectives"; they hold "truth" (Howard 1999).

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Critical literacy questions the status quo, including the myth of education as the "great equalizer." It challenges inequality and makes clear the connection between knowledge and power (Aronowitz and Giroux 1993). It encourages critical reflection of individual experiences and calls for social analysis and social change (Auerbach 1992). Adult educators can teach critical literacy by (1) connecting learning to learners' lived experiences; (2) helping learners question theory relative to their own cultural experience; (3) giving voice to learners and creating forums in which they can tell their stories (Sheared 1994); (4) helping learners view knowledge as something that they can produce; and (5) giving learners the tools to critique frames of reference, ideas, information, and patterns of privilege and develop critical consciousness (Freire and Macedo 1987).

Dialogue between teacher and learner is important in helping learners see the links among literacy, context, and meaning. Shore (1998) cautions that the process of literacy as social practice is not a reflection of learners' experience unless networks of power are examined. Through critical literacy, learners come to understand not only how education affects work, but also how racism and socioeconomic status determine the jobs that are available and to whom (D'Amico 1999).

Rethinking Practice

Following are practices that literacy providers can employ to ensure that their programs are culturally relevant and to encourage learners to move toward critical reflection. These are not the only possible changes, but they represent a start if literacy programs are to become more culturally relevant.

- "Think through whiteness" and what it means to be a member of the dominant culture (Frankenberg 1993; Shore 1998)
- Acknowledge that marginalized groups have cultures, languages, and moral codes that are viable social practices (Nieto 1992)
- Recognize that literacy represents a set of practices that can provide the conditions through which people can be empowered or disempowered (Aronowitz and Giroux 1991)
- Question whether the classroom environment, curricula, and curricular materials reflect learners' histories, cultures, languages, and experiences
- Construct and maintain supportive learning environments, acknowledging and accepting diverse perspectives offered by learners and emphasizing multiple interpretations
- Provide learners with opportunities to clarify their own attitudes and values, encouraging them to take a stance on issues
- Ensure that instructional methods and processes center on shared power and responsibility between teacher and learners (Johnson-Bailey and Cervero 1996; Tisdell 1993)
- Question the ways in which texts have been constructed, considering the purpose of the texts and the motives of the authors; explore alternative readings, considering what has been included and what has been left out
- Have the "courage to teach" antiracist and anticlassist curricula
- Provide professional development for instructors to help them explore issues of poverty, racism, cultural dominance, power, and internalized oppression

These practices will not become institutionalized quickly or easily. Teaching in a culturally relevant way requires commitment to change at every level within the literacy education program, from the administration to the classroom. All of the following will be included in and affected by the change process: the learning environment, instructional methods and processes, curricular materials, classroom norms, teachers' and learners' values and assumptions, teachers' expectations of learners, and criteria for evaluation. The changes must be as deep as the assumptions that maintain the status quo. In initiating these changes, literacy programs can encourage learners from marginalized communities to counter the effects of internalized oppression and to view themselves as members of the larger society. Perhaps, then, the prevailing definition will become literacy as social action.

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